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A Word From Tim Downs - August



Our Church's Wider Mission

Dear Friends,

On August 1, I had surgery for a partial knee replacement followed by a brief hospital stay. My recuperation continues at home with daily flexing of the knee for six hours and an hour or so of exercise. I have to keep my leg prone, so mobility, as we say “has been compromised”. I say all this not for cards or sympathy, but to set context. The past three weeks have turned out to be a very rich time of prayer, reading, reflection, wonderful conversations and correspondence with colleagues, family and friends.

UCC News

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Headlines from the United Church of Christ

New Media Project examines church's use of emerging technologies

Just three months into its launch, the New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary has already gained footing in exploring improved ways in which pastors and lay leaders might use new technologies to strengthen their communities.



There have been particular matters that have drawn my attention and thought. Let me share one of them. Before I left the office for this time away, I looked at the treasurer's report for the conference and noted that at the end of June giving by churches to OCWM (Our Church's Wider Mission) Basic Support was \$30,000 behind where it was at this time last year. With an annual budgeted figure of \$300,000 for OCWM in 2011, that is a significant number. Without going further into the figures, I do not know whether there is a pattern or cause for concern. Therefore, raising this matter is not my effort to induce panic or arouse guilt, but instead to invite reflection on the question “why is this?”

Some might say that this \$30,000 shortfall is one reflection of the malaise that is settling over our nation. We may be on the cusp of a second recession and unemployment remains tenaciously high. Our children are unable to find jobs; our political leaders disappoint us by their lack of vision, imagination or even basic leadership. They too often resort to the cheapest impulses of politics, fear, blame, xenophobia, cowardice. In the midst of this uncertainty, some of our congregations lack confidence, or hope for their future. This may be. However, this season of economic and social malaise is not new, and to this point, many of our churches have continued to support our shared ministries and missions through OCWM in a spirit of abundance and not out of a fear of scarcity. Therefore, if this is a part of it, it is not the sum of it.

Others might say,
"Well, we are behind
in giving because live
in a post-

OCWM

denominational age. People just do not value denominations, their purpose and roles the way their parents did. Institutional loyalty have faded, they don't join the Rotary Club and Elks Lodge the way they used to and they frankly don't see the purpose of church, let alone denominations." This truth is widely repeated in mainline denominational settings, but consider this: While the United Church of Christ and all mainline churches are in significant decline, the Southeast Conference has defied that trend, doubling in size in the last decade. We look forward to similar growth in the next decade. We have attracted extraordinary leadership, seen major increases in giving to our mission, and doubled our budget in ten years.

Repeatedly, people approach me to say, "I never knew that there was a church like the United Church of Christ, thank God!" In addition, "I did not know that followers of Christ would take his life and preaching fully to heart, and welcome the outcast, proclaim a Gospel of grace, not judgment, seek to be signs of God's redemptive purpose not only in the human heart but in the world." Said another way, we are a people who understand that justice take place when love growth legs and walks in the world. If we live in a post-denominational world, in many ways, I believe that the UCC and the Southeast Conference are well equipped to live into a post-denominational reality.

Perhaps we are \$30,000 off last year's giving because local churches see OCWM (Our Church's Wider Mission) Basic Support as "out there", "not us". When I was a local church pastor, I often sat in Finance Committee meetings facing the grim news again that "we just can't balance our budget, it's time to cut OCWM again. After all, OCWM doesn't touch our lives." I found this an interesting train of thought for a church, which turned unselfconsciously to the conference to seek a new pastor, scholarship for a seminarian, to assist with a conflict or a stewardship program. In the Southeast, we do all this and more. We bring a TAP group in to train your leaders at your request, provide coaching and support for your pastor. If there is one message that I want to be sure in heard it is that "OCWM is not about THEM out there, it is about US, all of us, all of us together."

Of course, there is something bigger in giving through OCWM than the ways in which it equips a conference to serve us in our local churches. In the United Church of Christ, we often talk of covenant as that quality of relationship that binds us to one another and to God. There is a covenant between local congregations and the conference. Each local congregation is the presence of the United Church of Christ in its place and time. The conference has a sacred covenant to support and nurture that presence of our mission by strengthening it and equipping it. Likewise, each congregation has a sacred covenant with the conference to strengthen and equip it. We need each other to live fully into the mission to which God has called us, supporting each other "on every leaning side".



One of the most identifiable characteristics of the United Church of Christ is that we are the people of "a still speaking God." The God is Still Speaking campaign, which originated in the national setting of the church, was the



in the national setting of the church, was the result of tremendous creativity and devotion of resources. It has had a dramatic impact on most of the churches of this conference, many of whom will proudly say at the beginning of a worship service; "no matter whom you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcomed here." This shared identity is another piece of our covenant, in which we claim a common value together.



Some of you were at the Annual Meeting of the conference, which took place at Central Congregational UCC in Atlanta in June. You heard Gary Myers, the pastor of Trinity Congregational UCC in Athens, AL, stand up and say the following. "If you ever have wondered whether OCWM giving makes a difference, I am here to tell you that the day after the hurricanes ripped through my community, and tore through the homes of my members, I received a call from the conference. Shortly after that, we received support with which we reached out to our community. You were there for US because you give to OCWM; you made a difference!" OCWM is not just about you, or about the local churches, the conference and us, it is also the way in which we are presented to a wounded and grieving world. It is in this way that we work to bring hope and wholeness with our partner churches around the world. Through it, we bring messages of peace, of justice and of grace.



So, if the Conference ends 2011 in a deficit will there be a crisis? I have learned that "crying wolf" about deficits in the local church and in the conference does not tend to generate generosity but anxiety. My assurance is that the conference will be here and the best of our ability to support you and our ministries around the world. We can muddle through. Nevertheless, doesn't God deserve a little better from us than "muddling through?" We in the Southeast Conference have always been a people, whose vision is our greatest gift, and it has gotten us through seasons of scarcity and times of fear, but I believe that we truly do have the capacity to equip our vision, with leaders, with prayer, and yes, with giving. I have written, "This is not about YOU this is about US." However, you know, of course, it is about YOU, because you are a precious and inseparable part of US.

I hope that over the coming years, OCWM will not be at the bottom of your congregation's commitments, but be at the top of that pile. I hope too that you will be able to find it in your hearts to respond with joy at the opportunity to be a part of a ministry that has touched so many around the world, beginning in your own pews, and walking with love and justice around the world.

Peace,

Tim Downs, *Conference Minister*
Timothy C. Downs**Timothy C. Downs**

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